

My 50th Birthday

*By HaRav Ariel Bar Tzadok
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This week I celebrate my fiftieth birthday. I have been on earth (in this lifetime) for half a century. I thought I would share with you all some of my thoughts at this milestone in my life.

I have seen many things over my lifetime and I have learned much. As I look over my life in review, I contemplate what today I know and understand and compare it to what I believed 25 years ago. As the world around me changes, I can see even more changes within myself.

My birth parasha is Hayei Sarah. This very fitting portion truly shines light on my life's path. This parasha is about change. It opens with the death of Sarah and continues with practical wise lessons about faith in HaShem and how Heaven works in its strange ways to accomplish its lofty goals. It discusses the episode of finding Rivkah and her eventual coming into Sarah's tent, essentially replacing her. The parasha ends with the death of Avraham and a small mention of the sons of Yishmael.

While all these events can be viewed as mere historical tales, there is deeper meaning to them, especially for those coincidentally born at this time. Of course, there is no such thing as coincidence. Torah stories and their allocation to weekly portions create a synchronistic relationship between those stories and those born at the time of their reading.

Not for naught did our Sages format the system they did. Just as Heaven established the universal forces of astrology to influence those born under said stars, so too did our Sages use their power of Ruah HaKodesh to ordain the annual Torah reading cycle and by doing so, added an extra set of synchronistic influences upon those Jews born during those specific times.

Like my parasha, my life has been one of constant change. I have learned how fluid life truly is. Nothing in this world is permanent, nothing at all. I have seen so many things come and go. I have seen reality and I have seen it pass. Then I have seen the reality embellished and changed. What was once reality has become legend, a legend, mind you, which does not exactly tell the entire true story.

Yet, legend has a life of its own. The legend today has become the accepted truth that everyone believes, everyone with the exception of those of us who were there. But who today listens to us anyway? Yes, so much has changed. I have seen the rise of good and its inevitable fall. I have seen the rise of the rewriting of history and the fall of what really happened. Twenty-five years ago, I would never have believed possible the things

that I have witnessed since then. Life, death, struggle, revival, more struggle, life, death and on and on; around and around turns the cycle of life.

The Matriarch Sarah was a woman of most notable character. A woman who ascended to the heights of prophecy and because of it, she became bigger than life itself. Not for naught did HaShem hold back a child from her until she was ninety. It took that long for Avraham and her to become ready to channel the chosen soul of the chosen son to Earth. Normal children could have been born before, and indeed one son was. Yet, I emphasize that he was normal, he was not the chosen son of Heaven. The chosen son could not come alone through Avraham; it had to also come through Sarah.

Being ninety years old proved to be no problem for Sarah giving birth. When Heaven wants something done, it gets done and natural reality seldom gets in the way. We cannot control how and when Heaven intervenes in our lives to accomplish its purpose. All we can do is to surrender to it and hope that we do not hinder the movement of the Divine Hand.

Twice Avraham passed Sarah off as his sister and twice Sarah was placed in a most uncomfortable and compromising position. Now, in all due respect, Sarah was never in any danger from either Pharaoh or Avimelekh. She could have used her psychic spiritual powers to kill them both with a mere thought. Yet, she went through the motions, silently and allowed Heaven to direct her course. She did not complain, she really had nothing to complain about. She knew the dangers of the world she lived in and like Avraham knew how to "wheel and deal" to get along. She never scolded Avraham for dealing with her as he did, because she expressed the greatest attribute any wife could ever have. She understood her husband. How many women can say that today?

The account of her death is unique in that of all the Matriarchs, Sarah's passing is discussed in the most detail. She lived a full life and died. Unlike Miriam, Sarah's descendant through her great-grandson Levi, she did not have a nation to mourn her. Nonetheless, Sarah was in Miriam, as she was in her mother, and every other Jewish wife and mother since the time her soul entered Rivkah, on the day that Rivkah entered Sarah's tent. A Torch of Light has its way. It is passed on; it lights one torch after another and the Light continues to shine.

Changes occur all the time. Yet, one will notice that most changes are only superficial. Change is on the surface. Deep down, nothing ever really changes, or it changes ever so slowly. I have learned that the vast majority of people never care to look too deep into anything. Most people do not like to be bothered with deep thought or meditative contemplation. Most cannot handle anything too deep. I have learned that this is the nature of certain people and it is not subject to change. It is just the way it is and I have learned to accept it.

Yet, just as the majority does not want to budge, there is always that silent minority that wish to soar with eagles wings. I remember how, twenty-five years ago, I was the student, under my master and Rebbe. I remember how he taught me one on one. I

remember both my successes and my failures. I have moved on since my Rebbe passed away. In many ways, I have gone in directions that he did not go, but I know that he for sure knew that I would walk these paths. Maybe it is my imagination or maybe something more, but every now and then I have a dream about my master and his master too, both of whom I can see smiling at me from a distance.

As I look back, I believe that I am honoring them by doing what I was taught and passing on what I have learned. And now, all these years later, I have become the master and I have my own students to guide and teach. On a personal note, I still feel funny referring to myself as a master. I know that I am so, in the eyes of all my students. Yet, I do not view myself in the eyes of my students, I still view myself today as I did back then. I view myself in the eyes of my masters. I will always be their student.

I still get the feeling that they are watching over me and when I even entertain the thought of being a master that this makes them laugh. I feel their presence reminding me that however far I have come and indeed, however much a master I am to my own students, I am still but the learner. I will always be the learner, sitting as I do before the Heavenly Throne, waiting to receive whatever morsels of wisdom and life I am able to attain. I would think that this is one of the greatest lessons I have ever learned and one of the greatest lessons I endeavor to teach. We are all learners and we always and forevermore will be just that.

Instead of learning how to speak more, I instead have learned how to listen more. For decades now, I have practiced the martial arts, learning how to move ever faster. Now, I have learned that the greatest martial art skill is not my speed, but rather my stillness. I can devastate any opponent in my stillness much more than I ever could with movement. Every true martial artist will understand what I mean when I say this.

Silence and stillness are two of my greatest accomplishments. These characteristics truly describe both Sarah and Rivkah, the two human beings who served as mothers to the chosen sons. I too know what it is like to be a parent. Parenthood is not all fun and games. It is a lot of hard work. It requires a lot of patience and diligence. Yet, this too is a part of life. We do not live for ourselves. We live to receive and to then pass on to others what we have received. This is the great cycle of life of which we are all part.

Parashat Hayei Sarah mentions that when Rivkah first noticed Yitzhak he was out meditating in the field. This is one of the most direct mentions of meditation recorded in Torah, right here in my week's portion. Is it any wonder then that I, like Yitzhak before me, truly desire to go off out into nature and commune with my Creator?

When I read these words of Torah, I can see myself reflected clearly within them. Even the original Hebrew term, "Lasuah Basadeh," to 'sua" (meditate) in the field, speaks directly of the specific type of prophetic meditations that I have performed for the last twenty years. The term "sua" actually means, "to speak," but this is not your ordinary speech. This is a conversation with G-d. This communication does not take place with words out of one's mouth, but rather through thoughts and visions emanating out of one's

heart. I have become very familiar with these prophetic meditative practices over my years in this lifetime. It makes me wonder how much of this I have practiced in past lifetimes.

I am middle age now, at least chronologically. I still feel as young as I did when I was twenty. I can still probably athletically out-perform most young men who are twenty. Yet, now at one half century old, I sense my mortality more than I ever have. Yes, I am healthy and yes I am strong, I can fight, and I can survive, but most of all, I can adapt. Unlike twenty-five years ago, I have now learned that although I can do all these things, I can also fail, I can also fall, I can also stumble and I can also die. I no longer have that feeling of illusionary immortality that the young have. I am very well aware of how if I mess something up there is sometimes no way to correct it.

Life is like a roller coaster. At first, you climb up to the highest heights and then zooooom, down you go. What a thrill! Then back and forth, up and down and all around and then the ride is over. Is this not the best description of life? First, we build, we go up ever slowly, and then with a zoom, down we go into the harsh realities of living, with all its twists and fast turns. Roller coasters make some people sick, just like life sometimes can. Others find the ride to be exhilarating and fun, just like life sometimes can be. I guess it is all a matter of perspective.

My life has certainly been a roller coaster, with all the ups and downs, the exciting moments and the nauseating turns. My ride is not over yet. I feel my ride still has some unexpected turns ahead, so I am just hanging on for the ride. Hayei Sarah is one such Torah parasha that zooms around and around bringing us from one point to another, from the lives of Avraham and Sarah to the lives of Yitzhak of Rivkah.

I find it interesting how possibly the main character of this parasha is Avraham's Canaanite servant, Eliezer, who the Torah calls the head of Avraham's house. He alone is entrusted with the sacred task of finding Rivkah and bringing her home to Yitzhak. One has to know the Kabbalistic secrets taught by the Ari'zal to recognize the significance of this apparently insignificant man. Eliezer was by no means insignificant. The Ari'zal (whose real name, as we know was Yitzhak), reveals to us the cycles of Eliezer's later reincarnations.

In his next life, Eliezer was reincarnated as Caleb, the husband of Miriam, and inheritor of Hebron, a reward for his bond with the Patriarchs. From here, he reincarnated as Benyahu Ben Yehoyada, the top ranked military officer and personal bodyguard to Kings David and Solomon. Later he came back again as Zecharia the High Priest and later as Shemaya, one of the great Talmudic Sages and centuries later as Rabbi Moshe Cordevero, one of the greatest of the Kabbalists. Eliezer who started off life as merely a servant, evolved spiritually to the highest of spiritual ranks. What a role model for me to have for my birth parasha.

I have seen with my own eyes that no matter from where one comes from; it makes no difference about where one can go. I have seen the mighty arise out of nowhere and

those of great birth fall to the depths. As much as many might think that how and where one is born means something, I have seen just how very little it actually means. As much as many believe opportunity is a predestined thing, I have seen opportunity as something one can grasp and run with. Like Eliezer, one can go from the bottom to the very top. All one has to do is simply do the right things. G-d is great, the universe is great and our human potential is great. Regardless of whatever humble beginnings we begin with, I have seen that there are no limits as to how high we can soar, if only we allow ourselves to do so.

I was born and raised on Long Island (New York). I grew up in a traditional Jewish family, went to public high school (by morning and attended yeshiva and martial arts classes by afternoon). I went to Israel with intent of serving in the army and much to my own surprise ended up in the grand Sephardic yeshiva Porat Yosef. In my day, I was the only American there. Yet, through Porat Yosef, I had come to personally meet and get to know a bit about some of the great Sages of my day. I have actually sat with HaRav Ovadiah Yosef on a number of occasions. I actually studied with HaRav Kaduri when he was in Beit El. I had numerous encounters with many other chief Rabbis and great Mekubalim, whose names many of you might be familiar. Me, the regular everyday kid from Long "Giland," I have lived liked Eliezer. I started at the bottom and I am still climbing the Ladder of Ascent. After 50 years, looking back over my progress I have come a long way.

Yet, now, I must again turn my gaze. For the writing of this essay, I can indulge to look back and gaze nostalgically on my past. I can review both my many mistakes and my many successes. I can learn from both how to take my next steps. Yet, now it is time to look forward again towards the future. I used to always wonder with awe what the future would hold. What can I say? Maybe one of the signs that I have grown old (or wise) is that I am no longer awed by the future.

I can see now the truth of what at one time I only believed was true. At one time, I only used to believe in HaShem. Now, my eyes see Him everywhere, in everything, at all times. I may or may not know how things unfold in this world, but I have long ago realized, that this world is not my own. It was never meant to be formed in my image. I too am but a cog in HaShem's great machine.

Therefore, I endeavor to do my job, as best as I can. As for the future, yes, I pray for the best, as we all do, yet I know now that I have no idea what that best is. Therefore, my prayer simply is, *"HaShem, Yitkadal V'yitkadash Shmey Rabbah, may Your Great Name be honored here on Earth, may Your Will be accomplished here on Earth, as it is in Heaven."* What more than this can any of us ask.

Like Yitzhak, I have seen great people around me. My teachers have been parents to me, like Avraham and Sarah. I too have had an Eliezer in my life, who is faithful in the house of our Heavenly Father. My Eliezer however is not a human being, but my guardian angel. I have written about him from time to time. Again, maybe this is all my imagination. Moreover, if it is, so what? Since when is imagination a bad thing? Unless one first

imagines and dreams, one has nothing to strive after to turn into reality. Yes, I have been a life-long dreamer, both when asleep and awake. Many of my dreams have come true and I am waiting to see if any others come to pass.

So, there you have it; my musings on turning a half-century old. Times have really changed. Just to give you a small perspective, when I was in sixth grade my family bought our first color television set. In fourth grade, I used to watch the original Batman television series starring Adam West (Tuesday and Thursday nights on ABC, same bat-time, same bat-channel). I remember sitting with my Dad (zt'l) watching the original Star Trek on Thursday nights. I remember watching the funeral of J.F.K. I remember the old New York World's Fair and years later the Montreal World's Fair. I was there the year Disney World opened in Florida. I remember when sneakers were a choice between Keds and PF Flyers. I remember a time when no one had even heard of Levis. I can go on and reminisce, but I believe I have made my point.

My first half century has been one wild ride. I do wonder what the next half century will hold. Will I be around that long? Only Heaven knows. Life is always in G-d's hands. I cannot promise that I will be here tomorrow even more so in another 50 years. So, in the meantime, I am going to go now and put my life's lessons to work. I am still going to be the best I can be, to my family, to my students, to my friends, to myself and above all else to Heaven. This is after all what I have learned from Avraham and Sarah, Yitzhak and Rivkah, and of course Eliezer.

Life goes on and Torah goes on. One day, like my ancestors, I will be gone and then my story can be relegated to the pages of history. Maybe my life and my teachings will become an inspiration to some yet unborn student. So, for those today and those to come, like my righteous ancestors before me, I will endeavor to be a faithful link in the chain to help us all move from yesterday to tomorrow.

Thank you all both near and far who I know are wishing me now a Happy Birthday. The greatest birthday present I can ever receive is knowing that I am faithfully passing on to you the Torah that I myself received. I cannot ask for anything more.

שויתי ה' לנגדי תמיד